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FROM AGRICULTURAL GAZETTE OF N. S. WALES.
January, 1904.

Miscellaneous Publication, No. 700.

The Willie Wagtail.

NATURE STUDY.

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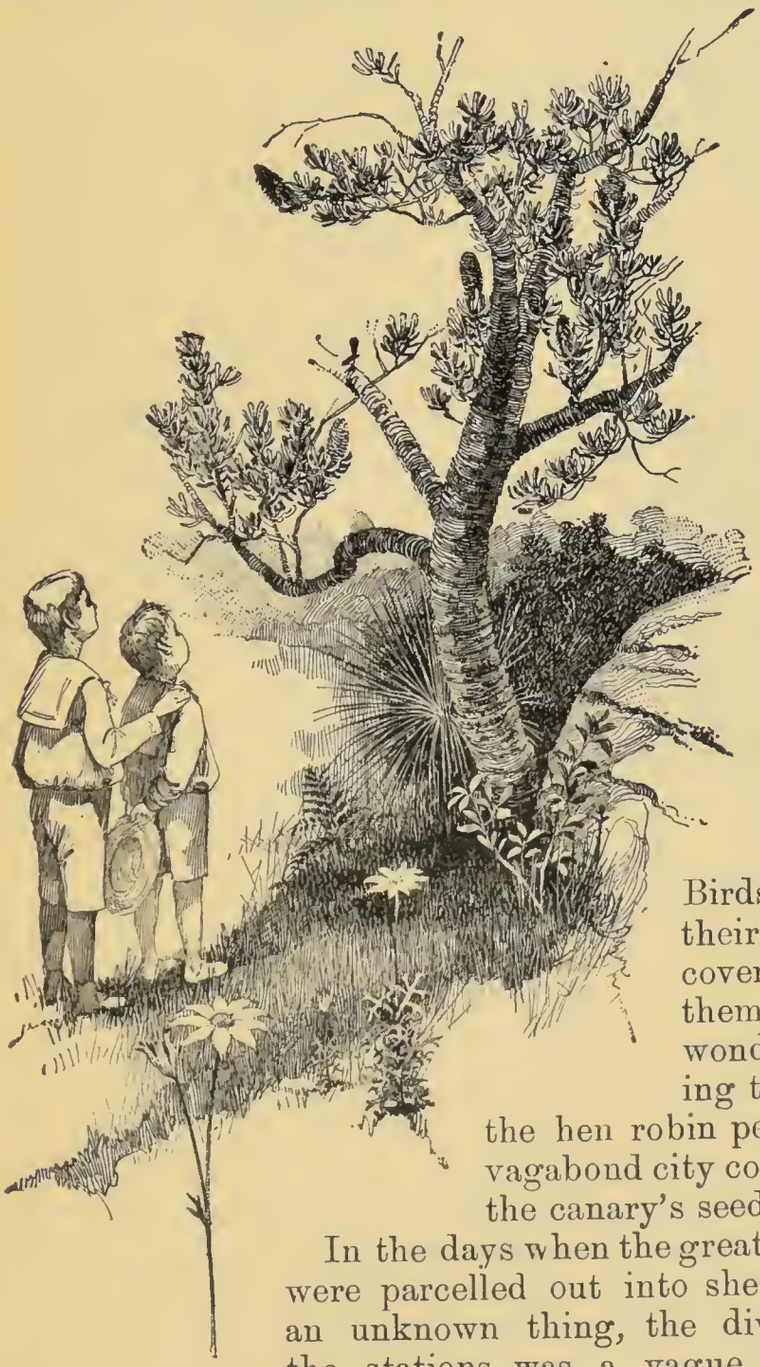
IN this bright sunny climate, Nature has clothed our hills and fields with a profusion of plants and flowers with their attendant birds and insects, but it is perhaps this very abundance of plant and animal life that is responsible for a careless disregard of the study of our surroundings. They are too common; yet, as Professor Huxley said, "Science is only common sense applied to common things," and every child living in the bush could be a "bush naturalist"; he has not the advantages of the city child in many things, but, with a little direction, he could be taught to think, and find pictures in the fields and sky, and a museum in Nature's workshop round his feet, and thus fill up many happy hours quite as profitably as the city child. Birds cannot be studied and their secrets and habits discovered without living among them. Who can tell what wonderful thoughts are passing through the little brain of the hen robin perched on the post, or her vagabond city cousin, the sparrow, stealing the canary's seed?

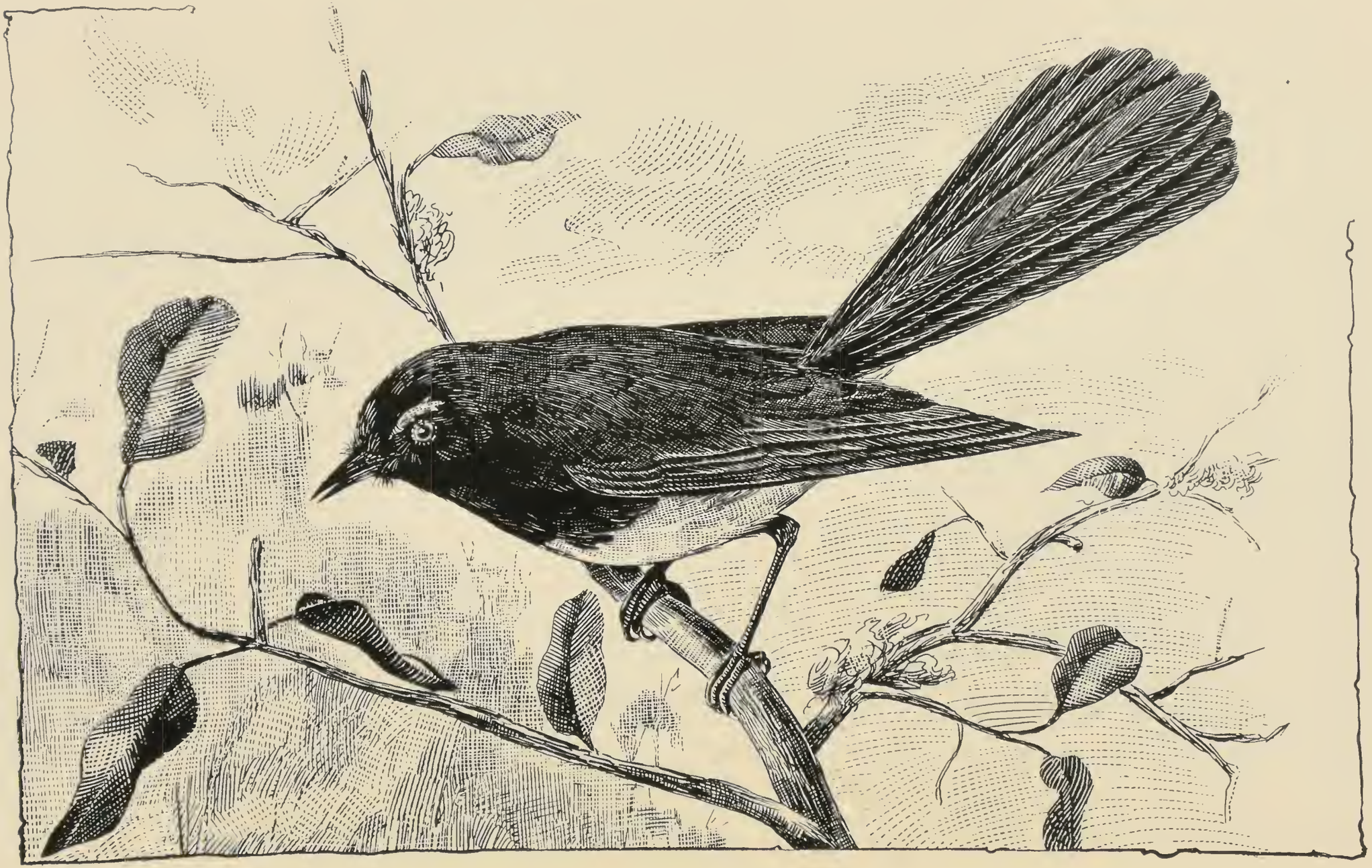


In the days when the great western plains and scrubs were parcelled out into sheep runs, and fences were an unknown thing, the dividing boundary between the stations was a vague and elastic line. Then

every flock was tended by a shepherd, who saw no human face in many cases from week to week, except when the ration cart came out to bring his supplies, or the irregular visits of the overseer. There were hundreds of these men—afterwards supplanted by boundary riders as the runs were fenced in—who lived solitary, lonely lives, as far as human companionship was concerned, but they had other friends beside the grave-faced collie, who learnt to know every movement of his master's face in the long, silent watches on the plains. Among them was a little bird, for, come when you would, you would find the "Shepherd's Companion" perched upon the ridge-pole of the bark hut, or fluttering round the tree beside it, and as the flock came tailing out of the sheep-fold he would fly down and perch upon their backs, his bright eye soon discovering any belated fly and his sharp bill soon making short work of it; then up he would dance and flutter with his bright, chattering cry that the children say resembles "Sweet, pretty creature," and if not too late, or otherwise engaged, he always met the flock coming home. No wonder that the silent, lonely men came to love these merry

little black and white sprites, and the "Willie Wagtail" of the coastal districts became known all over the west as the "Shepherd's Companion."

It is almost impossible to find any homestead out in the west—unless it is over-run with that enemy of bird-life, cats—where there are not a pair of these birds, which have taken up their quarters, and the first thing the stranger hears on waking in the morning is the greeting of the "Willie Wagtail" on the tree outside his window; and if he has spent a restless night in his strange bed, he will have



"Black and White Fantail."

heard at intervals all through the night, particularly if it has been bright moonlight, the sharp, clear call-note of the pair from their roosting place, breaking the silence of the night, like the old watchman's cry of bygone times of "All's well."

As Mr. Wagtail is preening himself in the morning sun, his restless black tail is constantly on the wag, from which he gets his other common name of "Willie Wagtail"; but he is not a true wagtail; and, though he resembles the pied wagtails of Europe in outward appearance and colouration, he is a fly-catcher, and instead of wagging his tail up and down our friend flirts it in the opposite way, from side to side. He has had a number of other popular names given to him by different writers, which may be more accurate from a scientific point of view, such as Black Fantail, Black and White Fantail, Water Fantail, but they will never supplant the good old bush names of "Shepherd's Companion" and "Willie Wagtail." Gould says that the natives of Western Australia called this bird "Jit-te Jet-te," which is evidently their interpretation of its call-note. It was described a great many years ago by two naturalists, Messrs. Vigours and Horsfell, under the scientific name of *Rhipidura motocilloides*, the first or generic name being compounded of two Greek words, *Rhipis* a fan, and *Oura* a tail, and the second or specific name from the Latin word *motacilla* a wagtail, thus translated "the Fantail Fly-catcher."

They are dainty artificers, constructing a beautiful, soft, cup-shaped nest composed of grass, bits of bark, wool, hair, and any other suitable material they come across in their rambles, delicately woven together into a soft, felted mass, bound all over and around with spider-web, so that when their labours are finished it is so neatly attached to the limb that it has no angles or sharp outlines, but blends into its surroundings so thoroughly that you would never suspect that it was a nest, but pass it quite closely, under the impression that it was simply an excrescence or lump on the limb.

The choice of situation of the nest is guided by the surroundings, but where the writer was well acquainted with "Willie Wagtail," in the north-western district of Victoria, it was generally placed on a dead limb standing out of a living tree; and if the birds were out

visiting, or warned of your approach to get away from the nest, it took a very sharp eye to locate the spot, however sure you were that the knowing pair had been beside it only a moment before. So it was bird-cunning against boy-craft; and unless, like a blackfellow, you had unlimited time, the retreat of Mr. and Mrs. Willie Wagtail generally remained undiscovered. If, however, you surprised the hen when sitting on the nest, she generally laid low and made no sign, trusting that her projecting tail would pass muster, while her husband came bustling up, watching you out of the corner of his eye, chattering all the time, and aimless flights towards the nearest tree, evidently trying to explain to you that there was the proper place to look for the nest. If, however, you are not beguiled by his tricks, but find it, and he sees that discovery is inevitable, and you commence to climb the tree, back he comes in a great state, crying, in true bird language, in a note quite different from his morning greeting—a compound of sorrow and anger. Having found the nest, you will seldom have any difficulty in getting up to it, and as the frightened mother flies off she discloses three or four—the number is variable—dull, white eggs with a greenish tint, ringed towards the broadest end with a zone of dull, brown, and blackish spots and blotches, nestled in a soft bed of feathers and rootlets.

Now, unless you are a very hard-hearted and thoughtless boy—and remember "that more evil is wrought by want of thought than ever by want of heart"—you will only have a peep and then climb down again. Don't even touch the eggs, or the sensitive little mother may abandon her nest. You will get a great deal more pleasure in watching the upbringing of the family if you have time and opportunity to visit the neighbourhood every few days, and you will soon gain the confidence of the little feathered creatures, who will take no notice of your presence; and the queer-looking little nestlings one morning will poke up their little bald heads, all eyes and mouth to enquire what you have brought them to eat, for at this stage they are very like other babies—have nothing to do but eat, sleep, and grow—and it takes Mr. and Mrs. Willie Wagtail all their time keeping these clamouring, squeaking, little bunties quiet when insects are scarce, but they manage it somehow. If the home is well chosen, and the babies escape the many ills and enemies that await every small life, the proud time comes when all the down is replaced with feathers and the boldest of them climb on to the edge of the nest and meditate about the art of flying, and it is probably a very proud moment in our little friends' life when they start the fledglings on their first flight and launch the young folks out in the world on their own account.

I am quite certain that any boy who has watched such a little family would never intentionally destroy a nest, and if the writing of this little paper saves the life of one of God's little creatures it will not have been penned in vain.

[One plate.]

Sydney: William Applegate Gullick, Government Printer.—1904.